Abhishek Jha
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Beyond 'Victimhood': Uzma Falak's Film On The Role Of Kashmiri Women In The Resistance

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By Abhishek Jha for Youth Ki Awaaz:

Editor's Note: *As part of our coverage of PSBT's Open Frame Film Festival And Forum 2015 in Delhi (15th-22nd Sept), Youth Ki Awaaz will be featuring interviews with the directors who are screening their films at the festival, along with a candid chat later with the organisers who make this excellent festival possible each year. With this year's theme being 'DIVERSE PEOPLE, DIVERSE STORIES', the documentaries being screened include "those that document, narrate, follow, investigate, represent, challenge, advocate, affirm, empower, unsettle and sometimes disturb." Scroll down for schedule details.*

Although women participate in political struggles everywhere, their experiences are often not recorded. In the case of Kashmir too, reports go only so far as to narrate stories of their victimhood. 'Till Then The Roads Carry Her', a 2015 documentary film by Uzma Falak,

challenges that narrative. Pieced together with poetry, songs, photographs, and interviews, it foregrounds the role of Kashmiri women in the valley's resistance movement. Calligraphy, popular novels, grandfather's radio – all become part of the political act of *"being a witness"* when they turn to ashes.

Falak, whose documentary is to be screened at the PSBT Open Frame Festival this Saturday (19th September), talked about *"the power of counter-histories and counter-memories"*, the agency of Kashmiri women involved in the resistance movement, and the exchange between the public and the personal that memorializes what the institutions forget in an email Q&A. Here's what she had to say:

Abhishek Jha (AJ): Last September, a post on Himal said that you were making a film on women's agency in relation to the Kashmir resistance movement. What did you learn while making this film? Was there any previous work that you referred to or were inspired by?

Uzma Falak (UF): It has been a long intense journey reinforcing my belief in respecting one's own and people's subjectivities, the power of counter-histories and counter-memories.

With regards to the process in general, I would say, after a rigorous engagement with one's work, one must learn to let go. It is okay to be discontented with your 'finished' work because we live in times when a 'closure' has become impossible and this 'discontent' propels us to go further in our quest.

There was no reference in that sense but one gets inspired, moved or influenced, if not consciously but unwittingly by the images, sounds, people, art, struggles, spaces, contexts, etcetera we comes across every day.

AJ: How has the participation of Kashmiri women in the public sphere changed over the years of resistance?

UF: [envoke_twitter_link]Kashmir women have been integral to the resistance movement. [/envoke_twitter_link] It's only natural that oppression of any kind breeds resistance across generations, genders, ethnicities, caste. I believe the notion that resistance of women in Kashmir is a rare spectacle or a relatively 'modern' phenomenon is false. Archival photos in the film trace this historical continuity. Moreover, intimate public spheres do exist since ages in Kashmir. And resistance movement has only increased women mobilization.

AJ: Women are always oppressed in wars, occupations, armed struggles. Does a non-violent struggle present a better opportunity for women to be equal agents in striving for justice in Kashmir? Does it change their role from being just witnesses of history?

UF: I think we need to review this notion of who is 'more' oppressed in occupations. For me, it is not only difficult to 'calculate' but deeply problematic. Take for example, the systematic sexualized violence in wars. Sexual violence in Kashmir is not only restricted to women. The incidents of male sexual violence are equally horrific, but it remains under reported. And if reported, it is usually under the rubric of torture. Of course, rape is a form of torture but we also need to recognise rape as rape while we talk about male sexual violence.

In a military occupation, how does one make a distinction of what is violent and what is non-violent? A multi-faceted occupation will only breed diverse resistance, at different levels. There is no 'correct' way to resist. Isn't positing Kashmir people's right to self-determination as directly proportional to their method of resistance, deeply wrong and problematic?

Creating this dichotomized vocabulary is as problematic as it is to categorize occupation as violent or non-violent. An occupation is an occupation.

To say that they women are caught between troops and 'militants' (like many narratives do even if critical of the state) deprives them of agency.

Responding to your question on 'being just witnesses', in the Kashmir context witnessing is not an ordinary act but a strong political act. Women have been powerful political agents, mediators of history, and participants in the resistance movement in all its shades including armed struggle as well.

AJ: In your documentary, we see women looking for solace in religion. But religions also are often oppressive of women. Does women's agency in the resistance *movement* alter this position?

UF: The identity of people is what they are in their own eyes, the self-image about which they feel strongly, irrespective of our interpretations. And faith is certainly a part of identity for many in Kashmir and integral to their resistance.

The idea wasn't to show whether women look for solace in religion or not (that is personal and subjective) but to highlight spaces which provide opportunities for women mobilization. Mosques, like other spaces, are integral to women mobilization in Kashmir and faith is also closely related to the idea of justice in a place where power of delivering 'justice' is in the hands of the perpetrators.

AJ: Are songs for martyrs common during weddings? It's interesting that you begin with Lal Ded, whose poetry is imbued with expressions of non-normative desire.

UF: In the weddings of 1990s they were very common. But even now fragments of these old songs survive and are performed. There are some recent songs as well. It is a way of responding to one's context and way of memorializing in a place where institutional forgetting and amnesia is the norm. It is interesting how spaces of celebration and mourning are metamorphosed and how they exchange their contexts.

This is the idea behind alternating between the ADPD protest and wedding sequences— to show an overlap and exchange between the acts of mourning and celebration. Also, how a public protest space can turn intimate and likewise how singing at a wedding (an intimate space) can transform into a space of collective expression and history.

[envoke_twitter_link]Kashmir has a rich legacy of powerful poetry which encapsulates history[/envoke_twitter_link], challenges the stereotypical notions of the Kashmir landscape, and can be seen as a strong expression of the self and collective.

Catch Falak's film at 5.20pm, 19th September, at the India International Centre, on Max Müller Marg, New Delhi.

This post has been self-published. Youth Ki Awaaz neither endorses, nor is responsible for the views expressed by the author.

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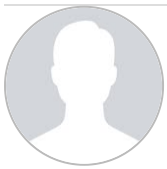

Written by **Abhishek Jha**
256 Followers
Data Fellow at Hindustan Times. Past: Features Writer at Youth Ki Awaaz. Tweets @abhi5285. Mail: abhi31416@gmail.com keybase.io/mott

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